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ABSTRACT

Although general education is supported philosophically by local institutions and by the state and national governments, students in Vocational, Technical, and Adult Education (VTAE) systems often express doubts about the usefulness and relevance of required general education courses. Frequently, conflict between general education instructors and vocational-technical instructors places general education staff of the defensive and isolates them from the rest of the curriculum. General education courses must be located at the planning level of the curriculum so that planners are better able to see the connection between general education concepts and major instructional area philosophy. The vocational-technical and general education staff should work together on correcting and constructing tests, developing and writing various instructional materials, and planning "skill fairs" and extra-curricular activities in order to improve instruction and communication and to increase regard for the total school concept. General education instructors could find other ways of making their courses more relevant by taking vocational-technical courses and by observing former students on the job. Employers should be reminded that general education produces well-rounded employees, and students should realize that the resources of general education will be needed as leisure time increases. (DD)

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"Why do I need this #*#*# stuff for?"

or

Importance of General Education in VTAE in Wisconsin

By

Glen M. Morgan

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"This stuff is garbage!"

"I really can't see what good learning how to write a letter is going to help me in my job."

"Can't I get advanced standing in dis hear english course?"

"Couldn't I get my diploma without taking these general education courses?"

Comments such as these virtuous disenchantments continuously flow towards general education instructors in Wisconsin's Vocational, Technical, and Adult Education institutions. These dissentient comments readily place the general education teacher on the defensive to positively support his/her various course which thereby increases the density of the communications block between the student and instructor and/or course.

It is not unique for VTAE systems to continually have their general education departments prove their need in the vocational-technical educational system. Although this push for relevancy from students towards educational need plagues nearly all staff within any type of institution, the general education instructors in VTAE systems seem to be those "rare birds" who force students to drop classes because of failing grades in general education courses, who have "no" area of specialization, and who really don't "fit" in with the reasons why students are attending a VTAE institution.

In addition to normal apathy in general education subjects from students, some institutions have various conflict situations

between the major instructional staff and the general education personnel. Any VTAE system vowing that it has complete rapport among all staff from all departments is hiding amid the "Utopia of Togetherness"--it just does not exist. Therefore, general education staff should take note of possible areas of what may be termed "Need Validation"--approachable techniques in showing its need and relevancy in total VTAE education. Although these defensives will continue in the future, there are ways for the general education staff to gain a foothold into that mucky area of "self validation" in which being forced seems to be constant.

Before reviewing the philosophical need for and comprehensive understanding of general education, and possible solutions to this disenchantment, a workable definition of general education is in order. According to Evans (1971, p. 51), the term "general education" refers to "...acquiring the ability (and confidence in that ability) to cope with one's environment in today's world." Courses included in this definitive concept concern those stated in the pamphlet (a guide to offerings in Wisconsin VTAE), "Opportunities through Vocational, Technical and Adult Education at Career Campuses in Wisconsin." Under the heading of "General Educaion" (Fall, 1977, p. 4), it states, "...to provide each student with concepts and techniques in communication skills, social sciences, natural science and mathematics needed in an occupation as well as in home and community life." Also stated is the applicability of these courses to the people and areas, "...General education is a part of the continuing educational experience for each adult and it is provided to meet specific needs, including adult basic educations, adult high school education, or classes designed to help the individual grow in civic and cultural awareness."

Wisconsin's State Plan (1976, pp. 3-4) for VTAE substantiates the need for general education concepts in its section entitled, "Educational Values," of which four out of the six stated concepts are concerned with general education. These four are:

1 (number 2) - Vocational, technical and adult education contributes substantially to the student's ability to solve difficult occupational and/or life problems.

2 (number 4) - Vocational, technical and adult education helps the student become aware that the chosen vocation is important to society and enhances the student's desire to meet the standards demanded by the job or the profession.

3 (number 5) - Vocational, technical and adult education helps create an appreciation for the values of our system of government and responsibilities of citizenship.

4 (number 6) - Vocational, technical and adult education provides opportunities for learning by doing and for students to broaden their interests.

And further intent is satisfied in the State Plan by the VTAE System Development Goal (p. 4): "Comprehensive programs will be provided to meet the needs of people in preparation for entering the labor market and for developing or upgrading specific work and general living skills, knowledge and attitudes."

Even though the state policies dictate the need of general education concepts to be supported in state orientated documents, local Wisconsin districts also coordinate information within individual locales in various media. Lakeshore Technical Institute-Cleveland, as an example, informs the public of the district of the general education course philosophy through the school catalog, a primary

source of general education philosophies for all Wisconsin districts. This catalog philosophy developed from the district's General Education Rationale, part of which states, "General Education...complements and facilitates the student's occupational preparation, equips the student to live in today's complex society, and creates a desire and capability in the student to meet tomorrow's unknown."

Support on a national level comes from "Education for a Changing World of Work, Report of the Panel of Consultants on Vocational Education." The panel states (p. 5) that, "Liberal education and vocational education are both essential aspects of the problem of preparing an individual for living and for earning a living; they cannot be thought of as hostile or mutually exclusive enterprises. An educational program which recognizes value in both liberal education and vocational education is most desirable for the attainment of future individual and national goals."

But support on a philosophical base is only as important as that need and application prove true. Sometimes applicability of a philosophy of general education arises only after the student and other instructional areas have been immersed into the system.

For example, just as technology is constantly in flux, so too must general education be thought of as a continuously updated process in environmental change, societal change, communicational change, and mathematical change. General education cannot be thought of as purely theoretical test tube information which concerns paper shuffling, group role playing games, information that would be useless in the future, or the inability of adequate transfer of vocational-technical information to the general education classroom or vice versa. The

process must be a continuous one involving total school personnel in the recognizance of and acceptance of the need for general education in the VTAE school curricula.

With a now solidified base of philosophical support from the "administrative" levels of VTAE instruction towards the need of general education, the need in viewing how this philosophy can be infiltrated into the total staff of the VTAE districts and within the hearts and minds of those students who feel that general education is a total waste of their time is now in order.

The foundation of any effective vocational-technical department must start in the area of instructional development or collaborative planning with general education involvement. This is where the general education instructor should initially place himself/herself in order to understand the complexities of sound decision-making and where general education fits into that foundation. General education must not be known as or referred to as a department which houses "filler courses" in order to meet state and district requirements within a particular program. General education courses must continuously be located at the planning level of any curriculum in order to gain strong and relevant footholds into this need validation area. In this concept, the various personnel who are instrumental towards effective program or course construction from the beginning are better able to see the connections inherent between general education concepts and major instructional area philosophy; therefore, more complete and correlative understanding of total vocational-technical education.

Probably the greatest difficulty for students in any type of educational endeavor is that of providing effective transfer of

course-to-course applicability. This concept is even more evident in the vocational-technical area where the student must come to see the tie-in between "spot welding" in a basic welding class and a social science lecture on "making babies." The total course content within the student's chosen curriculum must be constantly related, not only by the general educational staff, but also by all personnel who have contact with the student. There has to be a deletion of the "let them defend themselves" concept conditioning within the VTAE institutions and a volatile increase of the "how we can work together" idea if unification of student and faculty appreciation of general education concepts is to exist for correlative educational comprehension.

This line of transfer should also be employed through the utilization of various occupational personnel as means to general education course support. The employer must constantly be reminded that the general education of the future graduate is of utmost importance if a "totally rounded" person is to be placed in the job market. Employers are naturally aware of the need for individuals to get along with one another and aware of responsibilities of self and of others, and must be able to see the connection of general education courses in relation to the total curriculum offered by a VTAE's institution. Having a past student relate his/her positive opinions of the need for total education once that student enters his/her specialization, shows the employer the applicability of such courses and also boosts the morale of the institution.

Another concept is related to society's approach to a more humanistic relationship among people; an area where general education is involved in the total person. Educational methodology has recently begun to recognize that the individual in the classroom in America

is not a task or part of the instructor's "punching the clock"--the student is a person who has the capabilities to recognize and develop his/her potential, and not one who is to be stagnated in America's educational system.

Numerous employment studies have shown that reasons why people miss out on the initial employment opportunity or do not stay employed are because of the lack of human relationship skills and personal attributes they possess. That the individual must work with others and recognize that the need is always there for total cooperation is available if the person understands the self concept and is able to cope effectively with stress and other work attributes. This work ethic then is a crucial part of all general educational concepts which are taught extrinsically or intrinsically to the population of the vocational-technical institution.

The concept of futurism is also at stake for all individuals if the technological advances continuously prove themselves true as they have done in the past. Because people will have more leisure time due to less work time and more off time, the need will exist to be more productive in this release time in order to keep mentally and physically alert, rather than deteriorating in motivation and creativity.

For people then to be able to cope with this leisure time, there will have to be an insight into just how these needs can be met. In other words, if a person is going to wear the blinders of pure and specific vocational-technical education, no real "total self" in general education diversity will ever accrue; only frustration and deterioration will result. To be learned then doesn't mean total

liberal education with an absence of technical education. It does, however, mean that technical education must exist but with applicative living that makes the total person, making the VTAE philosophy come true: allowing each person to be a totally productive cog in the wheel of society.

General education personnel are sometimes thought of as suspect in the vocational-technical institute--they are the "Ivory Tower Theorists" who have to take a back seat to vocational-technical education. They are those individuals who have to constantly "prove" themselves and their courses as well as their departments.

Because students are education's only resource and total product, with decreasing enrollments and the need for expanded offerings and time slots, this Ivory Tower concept must deteriorate if general education and vocational-technical departments are going to gear their strength towards helping students and not destroying themselves. A development of personal relationships and trust is an a priori issue. General education personnel must not only work towards getting other departments to recognize their need in fulfilling students' needs, but also must take a hard and critical look at themselves in what they are doing to help the issue. Standing by and hoping that the problem will extinguish itself is an apathetic stance that must not permeate as a decision. But whatever plan is adopted, discretion is thoroughly advised, for assertiveness must not take an air of command--it must be developed, yet controlled.

In-service training in itself for instructional staff is another area where the "hands on experience" concept for teachers would be a valuable asset in which to enhance cooperative communication for the total school. Having, for example, the business teachers relate

to the general educational staff in specific subject areas at a designated time would cooperatively increase educational productivity between these two areas and also among the staff members as well. True, learning about retirement benefits, motivational learning theories, and the exploration of career education are interesting and at times applicable subjects, but the first focus is on the student, a direct recipient of our rapport as an institution.

Observing graduated students on the job can directly benefit general education personnel in learning those areas where past instruction is used on the job. Surveyed objectives that are researched and composed on a nationwide level can provide a basic groundwork from which to expand, but geographical areas where the students are going to be employed should be tapped so as to make certain the relevance is enhanced even to a greater degree. General education teachers, for example, could visit various industries, organize their findings, and then unite with fellow staff members to discuss and actuate their plans. Follow-up would then involve the major instructional staff for research evaluation.

These teacher relations days could be worked out as parts of in-service or as visitation days in themselves. Encouragement from supervisory and administrative staff is not enough, however, to bring about effective results. There must be an incentive, such as public relations recognition for the development, to add an air of accountable productivity to the task. Sometimes this incentive will be purely intrinsic--this internal desire which motivates the professional instructor.

Students should be directly encouraged to relate their own findings where general education principles partake in their employment

situations. A part of this teacher contact with students could take on the form of audio or video productions where interviews support the educational concepts of the institution. New students who are being orientated to their course or program and various media within the district can be excellent areas to release this information; a type of public relations which involve the total school and student population.

Joint cooperation of vocational-technical and general education staff in test correcting, developing and writing various instructional materials, and other combinational tasks could develop into producing quality instruction and consequently, high regard for the total school concept in the area of transfer unification. There may be some major instructional personnel who are skilled in their occupation but need help in organizing test construction, various handout materials, and the alike who don't have the availability of a curriculum specialist. In these cases, general educational personnel, say in the communications area, could assist the major instuctor in the material construction. Each instructional member of the staff knows his/her own program and performance level, and if all instructors would work to unify their expertise, a more holistic product would result, bringing about a complete analysis and total synthesis of teaching methodology and pedagogy.

In this area of test correcting, a "buddy" system, for example, could be set up to spot grammatical errors in material related to a particular occupation. The instructors could jointly correct the written portions of tests where relationships between major course and general education concepts transfer; a further showing of the need for and the application of general education principles. The

procedure need not be an extensive task, but utilized as a periodic check for course testing.

General education personnel should also work closely with major instructors in participating and coordinating "skill fair" activities, extracurricular assignments, and club related events. In this type of working relationship, students readily see the unification and correlation of those general education principles which tie in so well into major programs, and therefore, would receive support and continued appreciation from the students themselves. In addition, major instructors would note the concern of the general education staff in their trying to coordinate related activities and concepts.

Major instructors in vocational-technical areas continuously update their skills in technological advances as well as do general education staff in their areas of specialization. What needs to take place, however, is a dovetailing of these two specialized areas where an increase in correlative understanding and related relevance is noted.

For example, the general education instructor in the social science area will probably take a course related to the social and economic standards between the Blacks and the Whites in some urban city because the course is part of his/her particular degree program. Although not viewed as negative, what needs to take place though is the application of the learned research by the instructor so that the material can be readily related to the students in the plastics technology program or to those in a managerial accounting course.

To help the general education instructors in this dovetailing process, Gil Erickson, Communications Instructor and General Education Supervisor from Indianhead Technical Institute, contends that general

education instructors would find relevancy in taking various vocational-technical courses which their students are in and not relying on educational degree courses. These vocational-technical courses would be used to attain or update various state certification requirements needed by instructors in the VTAE system. This type of course activity would be an excellent method in which to increase general education instructor comprehension within instructional areas. The instructor would then be able to comprehensively correlate his degree program courses with those of his/her own teaching institution.

Although many ideas have been touched upon in the need to synthesize general education into the total VTAE system, there are inherent blockades which must be dealt with in order for this need to be met.

First, there is the problem of time consumption: How can the general education teacher and the vocational-technical instructor find the time to incorporate all that is asked for into a meaningful whole within the system? Three solutions are offered. One method would be to require the instructional staff to give of their professional time, indicating that the total school concept is part of their job descriptions. Another solution would be to work out a type of workload formula where instructional staff are given an allotment of time for this coordination and transfer application. And finally, a compromise on both professional individuality and time allotment would avail itself in providing a way of increasing a total school environment.

A second problem relates to the internal desire of the instructors working in the system. There must be a total commitment among all staff in the system to engage in reducing friction among the staff,

in reducing friction between the students and their dislike for the general educational requirements, and a total understanding of possible system downfall if frictions are not alleviated. Secluding oneself into hermitancy is an easy way for instructional staff to elude the problem. Successful communication could then be a possible key where the total institution finds that its educational task is being completely achieved.

Support of general education is not just for the general education staff--it is for all members of the VTAE district. General education must not take a "back seat" to vocational-technical education if the total person is to survive in the complex society of the future. Even though the philosophies of the specific institutions are printed for public availability and even though support is a constant move involving all concerned, responsibility is still the key in reducing friction and conflict among staff and within various contacts of instruction. For the instructional staff, a start towards unification is in order; for administration personnel, a verification of needed change and support of that change once underway. It is only through noting positive philosophies, collaborative planning, transfer applicability, humanistic methodologies, futuristic needs, leisure concerns, in-service training, student observations, general education instructors and major instructional connections, and technical skill update, along with the problems needed to be solved that the importance of general education in Wisconsin VTAE districts will secure itself.

A challenge is then sent out to all involved in the VTAE system of education: be aware of and appreciate general education

and its rationale, be aware of and appreciate what total vocational-technical education means to our future society, and be aware of and appreciate that total commitment to VTAE education involves professionalism in all areas. Who knows--we may find that utopia does exist after all.

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